

Preface



Diving into the Crypt

10 Theses on the Historical Materialism of Biddick

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* The following Preface is indebted to and adapted from Adrienne Rich's poem "Diving into the Wreck," which sketches out the exploratory soundings of a sea-wreck of forgotten histories that bears uncanny resonances with Kathleen Biddick's own acedious and depth-charged historiography. Likewise, in also threading Walter Benjamin's "theses" (see footnote 2 below) into Rich's and Biddick's conjoined soundings, I hope to make more visible the relations between Rich's "drowned face always staring / toward the sun," Benjamin's "secret heliotropism" by "dint" of which "the past strives to turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history," and Biddick's desire to "quicken" the "dead zones" and "absent silences" of the premodern histories that contemporary theories of sovereignty and biopolitics pass over as "before" and "then" (and never "now"), and which histories, as Biddick well illustrates throughout this volume, always, uncannily and zombie-like, inhabit the present. See Adrienne Rich, *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), 22–24.

... how might *acedia*, with its rhythms and temporalities of performative slow love, in contrast to the urgent, explosive punctuality of Benjamin's *Jetztzeit*, the "now" of his "Theses," offer insights into the slow death of the "to make live" and the slow death (or not) of "to let die?"

Kathleen Biddick, *Make and Let Die*

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

The trees didn't volunteer to be cut into boards
nor the thorns for tearing flesh
Look around at all of it
and ask whose signature
is stamped on the orders, traced
in the corner of the building plans

Adrienne Rich, "For the Record"

FIRST, HAVING READ THE BOOK OF MODERN MYTHS

First having read the Book of Modern Myths,
and loaded the Turkish automaton,
and checked the cuts of the Real,
and knowing that

*every image of the past
that is not recognized by the present
as one of its own concerns
threatens to disappear irretrievably¹*

she took with her into the trans/cryptum
the body-armor of the historical materialist
one indolent heart
the chronicles and the dead letters

¹ All italicized, indented portions of the text, unless otherwise noted, are direct or slightly altered quotations from Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 253–264.

the spiraling of the becoming-spiral
the splicing of becoming-splice,
that is to say, she was spiraling and splicing.
She was having to do this
not like Cousteau with his
assiduous team
aboard the sun-flooded schooner
but just there
and not alone.

SECOND, THERE IS AN OBELISK

There is an obelisk.
The obelisk is always there
rooted innocently
in the churchyard on a hillside,
or buried at sea.
We know what it is for,
the typology it measures.
Otherwise
it is a piece of messianic time
some sundry technology.

THIRD, SHE GOES DOWN

She goes down.
Aerial after aerial² and still

² “Aerial” here signals to something Biddick has written about Bracha Ettinger’s work, but which could equally apply to Biddick’s own thought and writing, which is indebted to Ettinger’s psychoanalytic aesthetics: “Reading Ettinger is like diving into a coral reef and carefully observing the myriad creatures whose filtering of sustenance secretes the reef. Her text blossoms with what she calls ‘eroticized aerials,’ receiving and transmitting the incipencies of a co-poesis. Habits of explication falter at such incipencies”: Kathleen Biddick,

the tears of the sovereigns immerse her
 the blue lanterns of the Patriarchs
 the shards of the mirrors of princes
 the clear molecules
 of our undeadly, thingly, arboreal air.
 Yet

*nothing that has ever happened
 should be regarded as lost for history
 and the truth will not run away from us,*
 so she dives into the spectral, untimely deep
 and there is no one
 to tell her where and when
 the collateral damage will begin,
 or where and when it will end.

FOURTH, THE AIR IS BLUE AND THEN

Fourth the air is blue and then
 it is bluer and then green and then
 black she is blacking out and yet
 her body-armor is powerful
 and she remembers
*that even the dead
 will not be safe
 from the enemy
 if he wins*
 but time is another story
 messianic time is not a question of power
 but of a spectral materialism
 she has to learn to turn
 the levers of the clock without force
 in the deep of the dead beat.

“Daniel’s Smile,” in *On Style: An Atelier*, eds. Eileen A. Joy and Anna Kłosowska (Brooklyn: punctum books, 2013), 41 [37–46]. See also Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

FIFTH, AND NOW: IT IS EASY TO FORGET

And now: it is easy to forget
 what she came for
 among so many who have always
 met their untimely ends here
 and yet
 she regards it as her task
 to brush history against the grain
 and few will be able to guess how sad
 one has to be to resuscitate Carthage
 among so many swaying their crenellated concordances
 between the reefs
 and besides
 you breathe differently in the archive.

SIXTH, SHE CAME TO EXPLORE THE CRYPT

She came to explore the crypt.
 The words of the medieval archive are alive.
 The words of the medieval archive are maps.
 She came to see the damage that was done,
 the *homines sacri*,
 the slaves of the sovereign,
 the Jew, the Saracen, the Illegitimate,
 the Untouchable, the Dispossessed, the Imprisoned,
 the ones *who have seen the face of the Gorgon*
 *and did not return, or returned wordless.*³
 She came to explore the crypt,
 and the revenants who lived there still.
 She unrolled the scroll of the dead letters
 slowly along the hull
 of a disturbing sovereign violence.

³ Italicized text cited from Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 83–84.

SEVENTH, THE THING SHE CAME FOR

The thing she came for:
 the archive and not the story of the archive
 the kernel itself and not the modern myth
her face is turned toward the past
where we perceive a chain of events
she sees one single catastrophe
which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage
and hurls it in front of her feet
she would like to stay, awaken the dead
and make whole what was smashed
but a storm is blowing in
from the furnaces of modernity
 the drowned faces always staring
 toward the horizon of history
 the evidence of cuts and blood
 the weeping stones, the lithic traces,
 the ribs of the disaster
 curving their assertions
 toward the tentative cryptologist.

EIGHTH, THIS MUST BE THE PLACE

I guess that this must be the place

I can't tell one from the other
I find you, or you find me?
There was a time before we were born
If someone asks, this is where I'll be, where I'll be

We drift in and out
Sing into my mouth
Out of all those kinds of people
You got a face with a view

Talking Heads, "This Must Be the Place (Naïve Melody)"

This must be the place.
 And she is there, Niobe whose marbled, stony hair
 is woven in ice
 her tongue frozen
 to the roof of her mouth
 her throat washed
 *with snow-bright tears,*⁴
 and also the armor-wrapped historical materialist.
 They circle silently
 about the wreck
 they dive into the crypt.
 She is herself: She is her.

NINTH, SHE WHOSE FROZEN FACE SLEEPS WITH OPEN EYES

She is her whose frozen face sleeps with open eyes
 whose stony body serves as the boundary-stone
 between living and dying
 between appearing and disappearing
 between being made to die and being allowed to live
 between being made to live and being allowed to die
 of being forced to live inside one's own death
 inside one's own murder
 inside one's own sacrifice
 inside one's own servitude
 to a victorious history
 and a triumphal procession
 in which the present rulers
 step over those
 who are lying prostrate.
 She is her whose frozen body is also a mountain
 whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies

⁴ Italicized section adapted from Friedrich Hölderlin's translation of Sophocles's *Antigone*: see *Friedrich Hölderlin: Selected Poems*, trans. David Constantine (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1996), 97.

obscurely inside seahenges and porphyryons
 half-wedged and left to radiate
*entangled registers of historical light.*⁵
 She is the half-destroyed instrument,
 the verge *and* the escapement,
 that once held to a course
 the broken speculum
 the fouled horse's bit stuck in the mouth
 a sovereign technology of the deadly kiss

TENTH, THEY ARE, SHE IS, WE ARE

They are, she is, we are
 by cowardice or courage
 the ones who find our way
 back to this medieval archive
 but there is something else too
 that steadily regards everything
 they, she, and we are going through

*It sees
 the violence*

⁵ Italicized section inspired by Biddick's thinking in this volume (in her Introduction) on medieval rabbinic commentary on the classical *porphyryon* as figures of messianic-futural time (in Greek mythology, *Porphyryon*, Greek Πορφυρίων, was one of the giants, who according to Hesiod, were the offspring of Gaia, born from the blood that fell when Uranus was castrated by their son Cronus): "Some historians regard this Ashkenazic version of the messianic as reductively vengeful, but that is not my point here. The *porphyryon* raises for me a more complicated question of the relationship of messianic and archival traces. The medieval Ashkenazi rabbis imagined the messianic, not so much as a radically different temporal register, but, like quantum physicists, more so as an entangled register of light. Their experience of 'to make die' criss-crossed on the *porphyryon* with 'to let live' in quantum patterns. In contemporary terms, we can think of their messianic *porphyryon* as an infrared apparatus whose spectrum would become visible in the light of justice."

*embedded in silence
and its vision
must be unblurred
from weeping
though tears are on her face*

*its intent is clarity
it must forget
nothing⁶*

⁶ Italicized section adapted from Adrienne Rich, "From the Prison House," *Diving into the Wreck*, 17–18.